

FOREWORD

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When I arrived at the University of Michigan in the mid-1980s, I found in the Department of Linguistics much the same kind of doctoral education I had encountered in England except for the first two years of required coursework. The more senior students worked largely in isolation on their own research projects, with occasional meetings with their main advisors. As in the British university from which I had come, this was essentially a “sink or swim” environment, where the students were expected, presumably as part of their “training” to be academics, to struggle largely unaided with their topics, as well as often having to scour the university to secure funding for next year’s tuition and living expenses.

As the excellent introduction to this volume makes clear, over the subsequent two decades leading up to today, much has been changing in the ways graduate education in the United States is perceived, structured, and orchestrated. From my own departmental perspective, I could note the following. Much more stable funding packages are available for students admitted to the doctoral program. The old comprehensive exams—and very much exams they were—have been replaced by qualifying research papers designed to approximate to the reality of the writing-for-publication process. The department has instigated various kinds of research group meetings, whereby groups of students and faculty can discuss readings and comment on drafts of papers and dry-runs of conference talks. Various units on campus—such as the Graduate School, the Center for Learning and Teaching, and the English Language Institute—provide numerous courses, workshops, panels, and discussion groups specifically designed for more advanced graduate students, both native speakers of English as well as those that have English as an additional language. Study groups of all sorts spring up. In effect, various kinds of formal and informal systems have come

into being so that younger scholars are better supported and nurtured, with the hope that personal anxieties, individual frustrations, and inter-personal conflicts are reduced to manageable levels.

The growth of the socio-academic networks I have just alluded to is, I believe, being actively encouraged across the research universities of North America. One positive outcome of all this is that the United States produces more than 40,000 PhDs each calendar year. On the other hand, attrition rates have remained stubbornly high. The editors, Casanave and Li, report in their introduction that around half of the admitted doctoral students fail to complete their degrees, attrition being particularly severe in the first year of graduate school. They either fail or drop out, or, as the graduate chairs usually put it, “they are counseled out.” The reasons for this are of course many and complex (money, personal, or family problems, shifts of interest, non-academic job offers), but a considerable proportion of those who do not win through to their degrees depart because of difficulties they experience within their chosen disciplinary cultures. It is this group that this volume is primarily designed to support and encourage, especially if they find themselves in areas where qualitative research is acceptable. As the editors say, they hope this book will act as a “‘textual mentor,’ so to speak, in the sense that experienced researchers and graduate students in the midst of their studies communicate in direct and accessible ways with readers who are joining them” (p. 2).

The sixteen chapters that follow the introduction offer a rich series of case histories into the vicissitudes of the graduate student experience. The first five are about lessons learnt—often the hard way—such as Fujioka’s account of her struggles to change her approach and her advisor. The next half-dozen have the general title of “Mentors and Mentees” and are co-authored by erstwhile students and their advisors. And it is significant here I believe that three chapter titles contain the word *negotiate*—a sure sign (as Prior (1998) has brilliantly shown) that in the end there is little strictly or inexorably top-down in the professor-doctoral candidate relationship. Further, these chapters in the middle section are also valuable for those of us who advise graduate students, because here we can learn much as to how we are perceived. Weiser, in particular comments ruefully on this—a feeling I can share as it once happened to me! The contributions in Part 3 are a mix of single- and multiple-authored studies and explore somewhat further how personal, inter-personal, and academic experiences come together to underscore how learning and especially learning to write are situated and embodied in local contexts.

Despite the complexities of the stories told in this volume, they are welcome “biased toward success.” In the end, the students win through, collect their degrees, and in many cases go on to take up tenure-track positions. The mentors emerge as sympathetic, willing to negotiate, and conscious of how reflecting on the two sides of the story has given them further insights into what it means to mentor junior scholars. The socio-rhetorical and intellectual journeys reflected upon in this book are told in a refreshingly open style with occasional confessional episodes to add further insight into the mindsets of the moment and with just sufficient attention to theory to provide a framework for viewing the unfolding interactions.

I believe therefore that many will concur with me and the editors that this volume will do much to help graduate students, and especially those concerned about their academic writing, to overcome their frustrations and uncertainties. After all, a problem shared is a problem half-solved.

REFERENCE

Prior, P. A. (1998). *Writing disciplinarity: A sociohistoric account of literate activity in the academy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.